

Biographical Profile: Prof WJS de Villiers

Rector and Vice-Chancellor of South Africa's Stellenbosch University, Professor Willem (or Wim) de Villiers is committed to supporting students to achieve their potential and has worked in the UK, America and South Africa to support them.

The youngest child of a former Dean of Law at Stellenbosch University, Willem was a very successful student, finishing Paul Roos Gymnasium School with the best marks in Cape Province before receiving the Chancellor's medal for academic achievement at Su cum laude in 1983 for MBChB and internal medicine in 1990.

Registering as a physician with the South African Medical and Dental Council in 1984, Wim started his career as an intern and medical officer at Frere Hospital in the Eastern Cape, which is where he decided to specialise in gastroenterology. After a stint in Pretoria, he returned to Stellenbosch University to take up the post of Registrar in the Department of Internal Medicine in 1986.

In the 1990's Wim travelled to the UK and completed a DPhil in Immunology at Oxford University in 1995. He moved to America in 1995 after being recruited to the University of Kentucky Medical Centre, and intending to remain for 18 months, stayed for 18 years while ascending through the ranks.

He became Head of Gastroenterology at the University of Kentucky and Administrative Head of the Good Samaritan Hospital in Lexington. Working as a gastroenterologist, he became a respected medical researcher and was featured in the Best Doctors in America publication. His passion is the immunology of the gut and specifically the role of the innate immune system and macrophages. His clinical expertise is in Inflammatory Bowel Disease (IBD) (Crohn's disease and ulcerative colitis).

Wim is a translational scientist who brings advances at the laboratory bench to the patient bedside. He has shown the importance of macrophages (and their pattern recognition receptors) in many murine models of gut inflammation. He then contributed significantly to the clinical development and widespread application of targeted monoclonal antibody therapies in numerous patients with complicated inflammatory bowel disease. This work was published in top medical journals such as the New England Journal of Medicine and Gastroenterology.

Moving back to South Africa in 2013, he became the Dean of Health Sciences at the University of Cape Town, before moving to his current position at Stellenbosch in December 2014.

He is married to Catherine, and they have two daughters, Katusha and Gera; a son, Braam and daughter-in-law, Kelly; and three grandchildren, Eloise, Beatrice and Rosalie. De Villiers sees SU as a mature university that is well positioned to be locally relevant, yet globally competitive. He wants students to receive an excellent education that will give them a competitive advantage as graduates in a rapidly changing world. He believes the University should offer an experience that is pleasant, welcoming and hospitable – in an inclusive environment. He is committed to continued transformation to address the inequalities of the South African past.

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